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ABSTRACT

This paper explores social-class consciousness and how it relates to education policy. Through autobiographical narrative, the paper examines how an original working-class background determined which route to follow in public education in post-World War II England and how that education molded her social identity and consciousness as a working-class person. The combination of historical context and intellectual self-inquiry portrays a social system that effectively uses education to continue itself at the social and political levels. These practices were (and still are) embodied in streams (tracks) that categorize students into potential candidates for grammar, secondary-modern, or technical schools. Stream placement is done through the 11-plus test (an IQ examination). Upon leaving school, the graduate would bring all the perceptions and notions of class into society whereby the system is promulgated through continued flawed policy. Educational research can identify, interrogate, and shed light on these practices, knowledge of which can contribute to improving the policymaking process. The paper ends by inquiring into the social and political value of educational research, its impact on educational policy, and how it should be effectively communicated to the proper audience. (Contains 33 references.) (RT)

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Feet of class, relations of power and policy research

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Symposium
After all the talk, what?
Teacher educators confront the challenge of Social Justice.

This paper explores the consciousness of class that underpins my research interest in education policy. It focuses on what I know about relations of class, how I came to know it, and how that knowledge now informs my research.

The first part of the paper explores the relationship between my educational biography and its policy context, focusing primarily on the construction of class, gender and learner identities within a secondary-modern school of the early 1960s. In doing so, I wish to highlight the understanding that identities are framed by their time and place; had I been born in 1984 rather than 1948, in France or Canada rather than England, into a middle-class rather than a working-class family, black rather than white, my biography would be very different. This is not simply due to the obvious differences in experience or privilege, but due also to the particularities of the education policies that operated at that time and place. In the second part of the paper I consider first, the relationship between

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my auto/biography and my interest in policy research, and second the liberatory effects of such research.

There is, at the centre of my research into educational policy, an interest in the extent to which the choices we make, the agency we exert, is framed by the policies of a particular time and place, which are themselves of course further framed by contemporary economic and social realities. That is, as Wright-Mills has said, 'to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society' (1970: 12). I now take this approach to my educational biography, so that I might illustrate it and relate it to the policy and the economic and social context of the time.

There are many biographical and analytical accounts (see for instance, Mahony and Zmroczek 1997) of the conflicts of identity experienced by English post-war working-class children who found themselves at grammar school, alongside middle-class children. By comparison there have been few first-hand accounts of the cultural habitus of the secondary-modern school (Bourdieu 1990), of schooling's consolidation of a working-class identity; the working-classes remain those that are written about, rarely themselves the writers.

Until the age of 26, when I began my first degree, I was uncomplicatedly and unconsciously working-class and by the age of 29, as my learner identity changed, so I was assumed by others to be middle-class. It was as if my pre-university years were dismissed, wasted, erased. Yet this is not so. I look at my world with the consciousness of the many explicit and implicit ways in which class privilege and oppression are maintained, especially through the policies and practices of compulsory education.

The title of this paper draws on the observation made by Pat Mahony and Christine Zmroczek (1997:4) that

> Class experience is deeply rooted, retained and carried through life rather than left behind (or below). In this sense it is more like a foot which carries us forward than a footprint which marks a past presence.

In reality these working-class feet have taken me through a stone-walled maze into the arbours of the middle-classes. They ground me in my consciousness of class and the power-relations that surround it, my understanding of the world – in Freirean terms, my critical reading of the world, 'a world [seen] not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation' (Freire 1972: 56).

There are many ways of defining social class (Crompton 1998), the most common being that related to occupation or the possession of economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997). Beyond such structural definitions are constructions of identity and consciousness. Identity differs from consciousness in that identity is how we perceive ourselves, whereas consciousness is how we perceive our world – that is, a politicised understanding of class. How then are class identities constructed, and what role does education play in such construction. Kuhn has written that 'class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your

being' (Kuhn 1995: 98). Whereas identity may change, this deep internalised knowledge of class may become the basis of politicised consciousness. For example, as an established academic, I am not, by any structural definition, working-class, but am marginal in both, and although, as hooks (1994) has argued, this can be beneficial, it can also be slippery and even painful. Despite such an ambiguous identity my consciousness of class is one of the lens through which I consistently view the world, and here I look specifically at the English education policy of the 1950s and early '60s, a period in which policy was based on an extremely clear understanding of class.

Narrative, auto/biography and history

The developing feminist interest in narrative and auto/biography appears as a reworking of the earlier feminist creed that the personal is political. Goodson (2000) details the way in which, from its original status as the ultimate sociological method, to its fall from grace as first the quantitative and then the ethnomethodological approaches took over, to its current postmodern return to grace – its lack of representativeness and subjective nature are now its greatest strength (Munro 1998). This move towards life history seems to contradict Hammersley's (2000) observation of the discernable trend towards quantitative research, research that will have greater impact on policymaking and practice than previously. 'Evidence-based' and 'transparently accountable' quantitative methods are privileged over and above qualitative. Auto/biography, however, illuminates the lived reality not fully evident in quantitative studies.

In writing this paper I initially questioned its broader relevance and interest – was it a self-indulgence? This may in part be so, but it is also more than this for it is sited in a particular time and place that constructs a unique framework for experience and construction of identity as have been discussed by Harvey 1989, Weiner 1994 and Swindells 1995. Goodson (2000) writes that the first stage of this type of research, the life story, is distinguished from the second stage, that of the life history, by other data that contextualizes it within its time and place.

In this paper I focus one particular aspect of my identity, my learner identity – most specifically that of a working-class girl who failed her year-6 11-plus examination. This identity is not, of course, separate from my other identities, it shifts and fragments across discourses, practices and positions (Hall 1990). This learner identity, like others, was, and is, always in the process of change, framed by the time, place, power relations, and other identities of the self at the time referred to, and subsequently further framed by the time, place, power relations and other identities of this particular time of reflection on it. The construction of identity is then, 'a dynamic process grounded in biography and history, subjected to description and reflection, and constantly presented to and negotiated with other people' (Walker, 2000: 8).

This focus on the researcher's own 'intellectual auto/biography', can increase our understandings of what we do and why we do it. In doing so there is of course the danger of self-indulgence, the vulnerability of disclosure (Walsh 1997), and, as in all accounts of oral history, the fallibility of memory (Marcus 1995). Then again there is the question of selectivity, silence and subjectivity. I choose the tale to tell, selecting what to disclose

and what not, what to emphasis and what to erase – even from within this specific focus on my educational biography. I may, as Goodson (2000) warns, be attempting a false cohesiveness in my tale. Others would make different selections and tell it differently; it is contrived, written in a style that will hopefully engage feelings, imagination and intellect. At the same time it is speckled with references and other trappings of the academic paper, it is not just my personal story, it is, most importantly, the story of an individual framed by the specificity of a particular education policy.

I approach this paper as a sociologist, whose basic belief is that society, as it is constructed, benefits some to the detriment of others. I view my biography, my actions as elements of wider figurations, networks of dependencies, wherein I wish to compare my private experience with the fate of others. That is,

> to see the *social* in the *individual*, the *general* in the *particular*, to show how [my] individual biography intertwines with a shared *history* of a time, place and class; to ask questions that make evident things into puzzles, to defamiliarize the familiarity of my biography. (Bauman 1990: 10)

The sociological premise of making the familiar strange is then, in this paper, applied to my own life. Such an approach has been new to me; questions of truth, selectivity and self-indulgence have gone alongside pain and anger as I discovered the blatant class interest evident in the policy of the time.

I am concerned that that my tale should not be seen, in any way, as a validation of individual meritocracy, for:

> While we bring with us insider knowledge of class inequalities, at the same time the academic from a working-class background represents a justification of right-wing rhetoric. (Reay 1997: 20).

In drawing on my insider knowledge of 1960's English secondary modern education, the point is not that my life panned out in a way that led to my return to education, but that for the vast majority of working-class people their days of compulsory schooling are all they will ever have, and, despite rhetoric, excuses, blame and numerous changes in policy and practice, the continued failure to critically educate and to creatively stimulate is, as evidenced by adult literacy rates, I suggest, little short of criminal, and, at the very least, morally indefensible. Neither do I wish to romanticise or glamorise in any way the life of being working-class, nor to pathologize or victimise.

Auto/biography and policy

I was born, in 1948, into post-war England, a time of rationing and utilitarianism, of bombsites only partially obscured by advertising hoardings, and the regular testing of air-raid sirens. It was also a time of hope, hope for peace, for plenty, for health, education and opportunity. My extended family hovered on the borders of the skilled and unskilled working-class, where both grandfathers worked in the public sector, one for the water-board and the other for the refuse service; uncles who worked as machinists in the local factories and aunts who had worked in the ammunitions factory and now worked either in the cigarette factories, shops or offices. In 1948 my father was a conscripted Royal Marine; my mother had worked in the office of a large book shop. My maternal

grandmother, who I lived with until the age of 10, took 'washing in' for other people. I was surrounded by hard-working adults.

In the September following my fifth birthday (1953) I started at the local infants school. Located in a solid lower-middle skilled working-class area of pre-war housing, this was a Victorian building with small windows, classrooms coming off the central hall and none of the colourful playground fixtures or art that is found today. The classes were large and we spent most of the time sat at our desks. I did not like school, and once, shamed by the teacher for not being able to read, I left in tears and ran home, wanting never to return. Aged 7, I went up to the junior school and, somehow, learnt to read. I had no understanding of how important school or learning was; it was just somewhere I had to go, and my memories of this first school are chiefly of the playground, a small space covered in tarmac and segregated into girls and boys areas.

English education of the 1950s and early 1960s was framed by the 1944 Education Act. It was based on the inter-war understandings of classed-society, rather than the emergent new post-war challenge, and as such, it reinforced the status quo. The Act raised the school leaving age to 15 and introduced the tripartite system of grammar, secondary-modern and technical schools, entry to which was decided by the 11-plus examination. This system reflected the structured hierarchical labour market of the post-war Fordist economy. At the top were the owners, (of shares, capital, land and production), educated through the English public (ie, private) school system – the future leaders, decision-makers and politicians. Next were the grammar school educated managers for industry and the public services of the new welfare state. Then, educated through the technical schools, there were the craftsmen, engineers and mechanics necessary for post-war production. Finally, there was the secondary-modern educated mass that would populate the pre-technological factories and offices, the numerous and necessary cogs within an economy heavily dependent on labour for the recently formed organizations of the welfare state, the nationalized industries and all stages of industrial production.

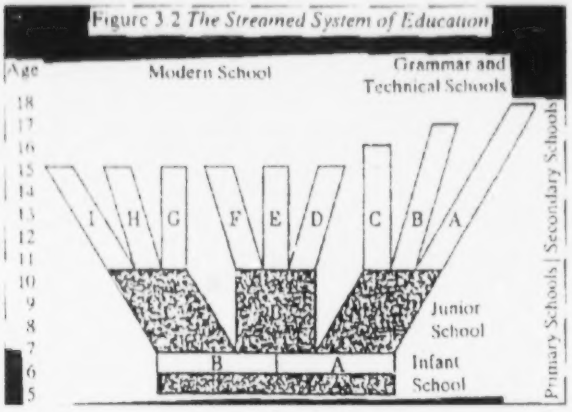
The 11-plus was based on the presumed objectivity of psychometric 'intelligence' testing – the IQ. Burt argued that each child had particular innate and unalterable intelligence that could be measured objectively.

> Intellectual ability ... is inherited, or at least innate, not due to teaching or training; it is intellectual, not emotional or moral, and remains uninfluenced by industry or zeal. (Burt 1953 quoted in Simon 1999: 175)

The 11-plus *seemed* to show a direct relationship between low-class and low-intelligence. As intelligence was innate, there was little that education could do to improve it. Therefore, the schooling of those children who failed the exam did not try to increase their knowledge but to mould their character for both the labour and domestic markets.

Two months into year 6 my grandmother died and I returned to live with my parents on a large new peripheral council estate – and I joined a new junior school. After an assessment that I do not remember, I was placed into the second stream of a three-stream final year. In the top stream my younger brother and sister both spent a great deal of time, especially in year 5 and 6, preparing for the exam, whereas we in the B stream

never practised, and I wasn't at all aware of it, or its significance for my future. My early inability to read, however, was to have very long lasting consequences.



An unattributed writer of 1953 commented that a child placed in the A,B or C category at the age of six or seven is almost certain to remain in it as s/he grows older (Simon 1999). This diagram shows that by year 2, children were streamed, meaning that whereas those in the A stream were on track for grammar school, those in the B stream stood no chance at all. Years 3 to 6 reinforced the streaming, ensuring that only those in the A stream would go to grammar or technical school – a maximum of 25%; the remaining 75% would, like myself, go to secondary-modern. It is interesting to note here that despite the rhetoric of 'secondary education for all' and 'opportunity' there were at that time, fewer grammar schools than before the war – hence the need for early and sustained selection.

The policy process is of course complex and messy, and, despite its long lasting prevalence, not all educationalists or politicians accepted the inevitability of psychometric based schooling, and even as I entered primary school, (5 years before I sat the exam), there were academics and politicians that criticised it. There were some that believed coaching could increase IQ by an average 14 points. Simon (1953) argued that it effectively reinforced class difference. In 1955 the 11-plus became a pre-election issue, and the Conservative Minister suggested increasing the number of grammar places and providing greater flexibility for movement at either 13 or 15, arguing that 'the 11-plus is [too] early to show your paces if you come from a bad or dumb home' (Simon 1999). Further significant criticisms were produced in 1957 by a committee of leading psychologists, and in 1958 by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). The NFER report concluded that at least 10 per cent of children in any age-group would be wrongly allocated.

However, despite such debate, the suggested changes did not materialize, and in 1958, unprepared and unwittingly, I sat the 11-plus, failed, and went to the secondary-modern school.

Critiques of the 11-plus have questioned their objectivity (Howe 1997; Gillborn *et al* 2001), and have argued that there is no such thing as a test that measures innate ability but that all tests measure knowledge and skills that have been explicitly learnt – thus B

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and C stream children stood very little chance. The power of the 11-plus actually lies in its cloak of meritocracy and equality of opportunity. The central concept of ability was framed by an emergent discourse of fairness, objectivity and equality; all children were given an 'equal' chance, and those who 'failed' were seen as being without academic ability and would thereafter be appropriately and differently educated.

Prefabricated, with large windows and several stories high, the new secondary-modern had gender-segregated playgrounds and a very large sports field, a couple of tennis courts and a small swimming pool. Most significantly, this secondary-modern had grammar streams 'attached'.

As I entered this school in 1959 there were 1,595,559 children in secondary modern schools, compared with only 641,044 in grammar and 99,224 in technical schools (Simon 1999; table 5a). Although, in the 1960s, there were nearly 4000 secondary-modern schools in England and Wales, this was one of the very few new ones. Most schools were solely secondary-modern, and most were badly maintained and very poorly resourced – the old elementary schools simply renamed (McCulloch 1998). A few English local authorities implemented the 1944 Act through a mixture of grammar schools and bilateral schools, either technical-modern or, as in the case of my city, ten grammar-modern schools such as mine. Yet despite what might have seemed like an early version of comprehensive schooling, there was in fact, (in my school at least), an impermeable divide between the modern and the grammar. Furthermore, there was a hierarchy of status that existed even amongst the grammar schools and a grammar of this type, whilst effectively separate from the secondary-modern, would be very low status.

Streamed throughout, classes ran from c to e, with a final f, remedial class; the grammar school attachment was a and b. I was placed in class e. The following year I was in class d and by year 9, continually at the top of class c (the top of the secondary modern school). But I could go no further. I had hit what I have elsewhere referred to as the concrete cellar of class (Brine 1999).

Dent, the editor of the TES at the time, identified five different types of secondary-modern school: the elementary, the higher elementary, the (inferior) academic, the specialist, and the vocational (McCulloch 1998). My school fitted most closely to the inferior academic. Dent remarked that in schools such as these, academic subjects were taught in much the same way, although to a less advanced level, as in grammar schools. When compared with the other types of secondary modern, this may be so, but there was no comparison to be made with grammar schools themselves. Nevertheless this lower academic ethos, coupled with the grammar-stream, meant that the teachers and the other facilities were arguably better than in other secondary-modern schools.

This highly restricted curriculum was deliberate government policy that both reflected and constructed class relations. For example, a key policy document of the time, the Norwood Report (1943), devoted only half a page to the secondary school curriculum, yet one hundred pages to that of the grammar schools, believing the secondary moderns to be beyond their scope. Furthermore, local authorities and individual schools were

given enormous freedom to 'experiment' with the curriculum provided they did not try to 'imitate' the grammar schools, for they were, as stressed by one of the main Chief Education Officers of the time, to be as distinctive from grammar schools as possible (McCulloch 1998). The subsequent Newsom Committee that produced its influential report in 1963 continued this approach to the modern curriculum. Although discussions ranged over the degree of restriction, the basic premise that the secondary-modern curriculum should be restricted was not contested. The aim was 'alertness of mind' rather than an understanding of the world.

The curriculum of the modern school was very different to that of the grammar. For example, at the age of 14 I was able to drop maths. We were excluded from gaining any kind of critical understanding of our world: geography was physical, history was always the 'cave men' and 'the Romans', science was basic biology; languages, literature and, subsequently, maths were non-existent. Homework was definitely not for us. My experience of secondary education was one in which I experienced a consolidation of both class- and learner-identity where each reinforced the stagnation of the other.

The Newsom Committee considered the place of English within the curriculum and advised teachers not to 'think of the weaker boys and girls as living in a kind of nature reserve, debarred by lack of ability from the great things of our civilisation, since that way lies apartheid' (quoted in McCulloch 1998: 124). Even though here the Committee warns against such an attitude, the choice of language is indicative of the pathologization of the working-classes. The recommendation of the Committee was for a functional English and a similarly restricted Mathematics; in 1962 an HMI suggested a restricted syllabus that would concentrate solely on the basic need to add, subtract, multiply and carry out simple division of numbers and money. Moreover, as McCulloch (1998) has pointed out, the curriculum was based on a particular classed perception of the social characteristics of the pupils.

Furthermore, the curriculum constructed a gendered identity of class; one that would 'educate' girls for their 'future vocation of home-making and the nurture of children' and thus the curriculum should emphasize 'home-making and how to grow into women' (Newsom 1948 quoted in McCulloch 1998: 121). In their submissions to the Newsom Committee of the late 50s/early 60s both the National Association of Head Teachers and the Association of Teachers of Domestic Science both argued strongly for the centrality of domestic subjects within the curriculum – 'the subject around which all other subjects should revolve'. Based on such an understanding of girls' future domestic roles, there was, even within the same stream, less time given to girls than boys for maths and science – a curriculum already highly restricted by social class, was thus further restricted by gender. Interwoven with the emphasis on domesticity was the pathologization of the working-class girl – our main 'educational' task was to learn how to perform our future roles of wives and mothers: 'the curriculum for girls [was] also based on an uncomfortably and often hostile image of the working-class girl. Such girls it was widely asserted, were generally rebellious, sexually promiscuous, and a danger to society' (McCulloch 1998: 121).

In my school, there was a lot of needlework and domestic science – I learnt to make starch for stiffening shirt-collars, to iron 'correctly', bake cakes, repair electric plugs and practice domesticity in the school apartment, where we spent the day cleaning and preparing a 'high tea' for our guests – our mothers (neither the concept of high tea nor the menu were typical of home). The curriculum was further reinforced by the building itself: the girls' entrance was framed on one side by the two large domestic science rooms and the school apartment, and on the other side by two equally large needlework rooms. My school reports show the domestic science teacher's pleasure that at age 14 I was 'developing into a very pleasant girl' and at 15 into 'a responsible girl'. (This particular working-class girl's 'rebelliousness' and potential 'dangerousness' was clearly being 'domesticated'.)

Whereas the 11-plus guarded the gateway to grammar schools, the new year 11 exam, the General Certificate of Education (GCE) guarded entrance to higher education; secondary-modern schools were not allowed to let their pupils sit the grammar school exam. It was feared that, even with 11-plus filtering and the restricted curriculum, there would still be increasing numbers that would qualify for higher education – more than were needed by the labour market. Over qualified and under-employed people would lead to social instability. Hence, Circular 103 of 1946 announced regulations that would 'prevent schools *other than* the grammar schools from entering *any* pupils for *any* external examination under the age of seventeen'; such an explicit directive was subsequently replaced by less obvious barriers: the new GCE was only sit-able at age 16 (one year after the school leaving age), and the standard of the examination was high, 'thus excluding secondary modern children':

> Even under a Labour government, elected with a massive majority, the mediation of existing class relations was still seen as the major function of the education system. (Simon 1999: 115)

I stayed on at school past the leaving-age of 15, and despite promises that I would be able to take some GCEs, this never materialised, and so I sat a very local, secondary modern exam that no one now, or then, has ever heard of. We were to have no transferable cultural capital whatsoever. These local exams were worse than nothing – rather than give an indication of what we might be capable of, they instead suggested the limit *of what we could do.*

Teachers' expectations were very low. The exception was an English teacher who joined the school in my last years and argued that some of us in the C stream should be allowed to sit the English Language GCE; with very little preparation we did, and a few of us passed.

The rigid interpretation and implementation of policy within my school illustrates the way in which a national education policy is simply one part of the policy cycle, for the local authority and the school reconstructed the policy quite differently from some other authorities and schools of the time. The GCE exams also illustrates the time-lag between policy debate and practice, for in 1958, (that is six years before my year 11), despite the

government pressure for grammar exclusivity, over 25 per cent of secondary schools had entered GCE candidates (some possibly entered for just one exam). This trend was strongly resisted by those who feared this would devalue the grammar exam and by those who feared that too many young people might qualify for 'better' positions within the labour market. For instance, the Chief Inspector of Schools wrote in 1958 that the secondary moderns were becoming increasingly aware of the needs and aspirations of their more able pupils and were threatening to blur the lines of distinction between grammar and modern.

There remained, however, difficult issues concerning those at the borderline of secondary modern and grammar. Newsom wrote in 1955 that it was 'difficult to distinguish' between the pupils at the top of secondary modern and those at the bottom of the grammar, and he pointed out that whereas the parents of a middle-class 11+ 'failure' could send them to an independent school where they often go on to pass four or more GCEs, the parents of the working-class child are unable to do this. In 1959, the Crowther Report acknowledged that there were secondary-modern children whose 'knowledge [was] comparable to that of many grammar school pupils' and suggested they sit external examinations, for these were 'the modern school's potential GCE candidates, and must not be robbed of their chance'. However, the policy response to these concerns was not secondary modern access to the GCE and its grammar curricula but a new purpose-built examination for the 'less able' – the Certificate for Secondary Education introduced in 1962 and first sat in 1965 (the year after I left school) (Below Report, 1960; Lowe 1997).

Exclusion from the grammar GCE exam meant exclusion from higher education. The Robbins Report on Higher Education (1963) identified class as the main factor of inequality: only 2 per cent (or one in 50) of children of semi-skilled or unskilled workers went on to higher education despite representing 22 per cent of the total population, as contrasted to the 45 per cent of those from higher professional families.

The discourse around this level of creditation has changed, but consider the current English situation, where some are entered for A-C grades and others for C-E with no possibility of achieving the higher ones – a decision frequently made in year 8 or 9 with little parental or pupil involvement or awareness. Is this really any different?

Beyond the curriculum, the locality and social relations of the school also contributed to the construction of identities. Whereas those at grammar school travelled across the city, thus expanding their spatial and cultural knowledge, my school served the neighbourhood catchment area and I walked. The curricula barrier was replicated socially; good at sports, I played in a team where everyone else was from the grammar stream. Such fraternization was frowned upon – the grammar girls were 'other' to the modern, and to be seen with them was a betrayal of my 'own', an aspiration to the 'other' – a marginal position reinforced by being 'top of the class'.

Though the policies of the 1950s/early 60s reflected clear and unambiguous class and gender interests, the construction of class, gender and learner identities are not static or singular, not solid and unmovable, but complex and contradictory. We are not totally

passive to the constructions of others for we ourselves move, resist and take on multiplicitous and changing identities (Griffiths 1995) – for within the class-based constructions of the school I unwittingly played/struggled at the edges of the class and learner divide. However, despite my attempts to confront and move beyond the constraining structures, and despite my practices of passive resistance, I was constructed by the school as a working-class girl, who despite academic and social aspirations, was destined not for the sixth-form and university but, in the first place, for the labour market (for the nursing cadet that I began with or the office worker that I quickly became), and later, for the domestic market of housewife and mother -- that with many women of my generation I instinctively fought against, and later, through feminism, theorised. The linkage between secondary modern education and the labour market is clearly shown in the 1945 Ministry of Education pamplet, *The Nation's schools, their plan and purpose*, which points to 'repetitive and routine process work [that would] not demand any measure of technical skill or knowledge', emphasising instead that the working-classes should be 'trained in character' and 'adaptable' (quoted in McCulloch 1998: 61). Within the policy-making process there were others who similarly held a pathologizing view of secondary-modern working-class pupils, speaking of the need to 'instil standards and values, responsibility to community, tolerance, dependability and absolute honesty' (McCulloch 1998: 130).

Throughout the years of my secondary schooling, society was changing and perhaps my frustrations were symptomatic of those changes, for as epitomised in the 1944 Act, the rigidity of selection and the narrowness of meritocracy reflected an explicitness of class interest that would, over the ensuing decades go through significant discursive shifts which would nevertheless leave the materiality of class privilege and oppression intact, and in some instances, strengthened.

For instance, since the 1950s there have been many educational reforms in which there are discernable shifts in the class discourse. Yet the basic idea of working-class equals low academic ability; of working-class people being more naturally vocational; and of course, the general pathologization, is as evident now as it was then. Consider, for example, the proposed specialist schools, the discourse on teenage mothers and unemployed people.

Auto/biography, Research and Social Justice

There is then, a relationship between my experience of schooling and my belief that education is political, structurally benefiting some to the detriment of others. Education, as an instrument of government policy, is powerful, it has the potential to fail people, to *under*-educate; but, as Freire (1972) and others have reminded us, it *can* also empower and even liberate. Educational research can identify and interrogate these processes, bear witness to their effect, and occasionally contribute to the policy-making process.

My biography informs my research interest in policy, first, in its discursive construction and its practical implications for relations of class and gender power – for the ways in which it limits peoples' lives; second, in the agency of people and institutions, in the many ways in which, individually and collectively, we positively use, resist and

reconstruct that policy. Policy and agency are both contextualised by the specificity of time and place.

Throughout the recent neo-liberal past I have thought that if I were a young person leaving school with such poor qualifications I would not have had the opportunity to rethink my learner identity – I would continue to have a very low belief in my abilities, and hence in my earning power and the choices that, in a range of contexts, I could make with my life. I've wondered if, within the comprehensive system, I would have been less held-back than in the secondary modern school, or would I have been one of the still-too-many that regularly leave compulsory schooling with no GCSE A-C grades because I would once again be 'streamed' into the lower grades. As a mature student of the 1990s, would I have taken the 'access' route instead of A levels, and hence, possibly been channelled towards a particular set of degree options. Without a grant, and under the looming pressure of a loan, would I have chosen higher education over the job market?

Taking part in an international conference on social justice research held at the University Umea in June 2000, the paper presenters continued after the public conference to discuss our papers and our role as researchers. We ended our discussions by questioning the intent and the effect of our work. Why did we do what we do? What effect does it have on questions and realities of social justice?

Becker (1967) famously asked 'whose side are we on?' Eschewing any postmodern attempt to undermine the notion of sides, I am on the side of the working-classes and the under-educated. Walker (2000) writes that 'our work turns on who we are and what we stand for ... a specifically political understanding which involves justice and fairness' (p5). This is linked to the concept of authenticity, defined by Griffiths (1995, p185) as being 'true to oneself' – not a unitary self, but a continual re-assessment of the changing self, a process whereby, within changing contexts 'authenticity has to be achieved and re-achieved'. Walker (2000; 9) reiterates Anderson (1999) reminding us that in constituting ourselves as authentic selves we are not simply engaged in a kind of private indulgence, but that this process is central to what we do and how we do it, individually and collectively, and affects the kind of society we end up by shaping. Griffiths (1998) questions the positivist notion of objectivity and distance and suggests that we 'get off the fence', that we make our political values and positions explicit. Speaking of the artist, Picasso has asked

> What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who has only eyes if he's a painter, or ears if he's a musician ...? On the contrary, he's at the same time a political being, constantly alive to heart-rending fiery or happy events, to which he responds in every way ... . [Painting] is an instrument of war for attack and defence against the enemy.' (1945)

Is not an educational researcher, especially one concerned with social justice, also a political being?

Rather than answer the questions posed at Umea I offer instead yet more questions. Can educational research be liberatory? Does my research have political worth, and how important is it that it should? If we want to impact on society, how do we know if we

have? Is it enough, when we teach, to make significant liberatory contact with an individual student? Does it matter more if our writing reaches a wider audience of students and fellow academics and contributes to our shared debate and knowledge? Is increased knowledge itself liberatory, or is publication and dissemination more political when addressed to practioners rather than academics? Or does research only count when our work impacts on the political policy-making process? Do we measure the political effectiveness of our research by its impact on individuals or on policy, or is it the approach that we take to it that matters more: intent or effect? As a political activist I could, at times, see the effect of my actions; as a teacher I have influenced students; but as a researcher I do not know what effect I have. In short, is there any point in what I do? As a socialist activist friend argues, it's not so much what we think, but how we act. But, as academics, is thinking and writing in fact our actions? Is that enough?

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